Everything In Between, Beyond – Maë Schwinghammer

Translated from the German by Nita Tyndall

"Hello,"

I say, and the kindergarten teacher looks at me through her round eyeglasses. She looks friendly. That's a good start.

"You woman!"

I say it louder, make a sentence, and the kindergarten teacher looks horrified at me.

"He means: Miss,"

my mother says quickly, and I want to add: yes of course I mean 'Miss.' What's so hard to understand? But I don't say anything.

"Good to know!"

says the woman, somewhat bewildered. The friendly expression has completely disappeared from her face.

"If you can't understand him and it's important, you can always call me. Here's my office number. Sometimes he gets upset when no one understands him."

The woman takes the slip of paper from my mother and smiles.

"That's no problem. We have children who don't talk at all, some who talk a lot, and now we have one who babbles a little."

Babbles? Did she really just say babbles? This woman!

"Um… yes, well, I need to go to work. Like I said, please call."

My mother leaves.

"So, let's take your jacket off now."

I can do that by myself, I think, but I let her help, even though I really don't want to.

"Good job."

I cry, and don't know exactly why.

"Your Mama will pick you up this afternoon, but let's get you a hot chocolate and an apple, and you can get to know the other children."

I cry harder.

“He doesn’t play with the others, no matter what we say. He’s been here three weeks and hasn’t tried to play with the others once. He understands what I’m saying, right?”

I’m listening, and I understand exactly what Auntie, the kindergarten teacher, says. During our morning hot chocolate some of the other children were saying if you roll your eyes too much, they’ll stay stuck like that. So I don’t roll my eyes.

“Of course he understands. He’s not dumb.”

Thanks, Mama.

“But when someone speaks to him, he just stares. Okay, Michael, how are you today?”

Auntie stares at me. My mother stares at me. I stare pointedly back.

“There, you see!”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to play with the other children,” my mother says, and shrugs.

“But… his development… he really should join in. Find friends. Things like that. Even if he’s a bit… well. You know.”

The teacher swallows hard. She almost swallows her reply.

“What do you want to do?” my mother asks. I look at the kindergarten teacher. I don’t want to answer at first, but then her expression is so weird I say something anyway.

“I’d rather play with the Duplo blocks in the corner,” I say, and see in auntie kindergarten teacher’s face that she understood the word ‘Duplo’ at best.

“He’d prefer to build alone. He likes playing with blocks best when no one bothers him. But there are surely other things he can do with the other children. That’s not so bad, is it?” my mother says, and I partly agree with her.

“But it’s much more fun to build with someone else, right?” Auntie stares at me with such an enthusiastic grin that it almost feels impossible to do anything other than nod happily.

I shake my head.

“Apparently it’s not,” my mother says, and rolls her eyes. I bite my lip. She’s wearing her dark blue work shirt, and I think that’s super cool. Like she’s really on duty and wearing a uniform, like a paramedic or firefighter.

“He’ll warm up to the others eventually. They all do sooner or later. This sort of transitional period is completely normal, even if he has, as you said, a…”

She knows the word. It’s on the tip of her tongue. I can see it, and if I can see it, Mama can certainly see it. She’s taller than me, can see the kindergarten teacher’s mouth better.

“Disorder. Sensory disorder and speech disorder.”

My mother cuts in, saving the teacher. I don’t recognize the words, but I don’t like the sound of ‘disorder.’ It sounds like something I don’t want to have.

“I don’t have a ‘sorder,’” I insist, but my eyes redden as I say it. Fine. Maybe I do have a ‘sorder.’ But I hear and understand everything.

“Of course not. You’re a very special boy.”

I don’t know the word “sarcasm” or what it means, but I know that sentence doesn’t sound right. At the very least I’m positive she isn’t my auntie.

“Coal,” she says.

“Loal,” I say.

“Chest.”

“Less.”

“Cat.”

“Lat.”

“Kite.”

“Lite.”

“One more time. And leave your tongue where it is. *Kite*.”

“Kite.”

“That’s really good,” the speech therapist says. She smiles at me. I turn, and my mother smiles at me too. I beam. That means there will be ice cream later. I also get ice cream when I don’t do well, but it tastes better when everything’s gone right.

“How long do I need to keep going there, Mama?” I ask as soon as we’re outside.

“Until people can understand you.”

“You understand me.”

“Until everyone can understand you.”

I have the feeling that might take a while. But now we’re headed for ice cream, past the car dealer with the glittery blue and red garland that look like Christmas ornaments.

“Vanilla for me, please. And for him one scoop of cinnamon and one scoop of green apple in a cup.”

When I hear the words *apple* and *cinnamon*, I think of belonging. The woman at the counter hands me a cup with a small green plastic spoon sticking out, and I begin my excavation. The green apple is greener than any apple I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Elle ataog,”

I demand, and Papa glances at me, but doesn’t react. He looks imploringly at Mama. She sighs, throws off the zebra-patterned blanket, and goes to the dresser. She hands me the *Quelle* catalog. I sit cross-legged on the floor, the mail-order catalog heavy on my thighs. Several times a week I leaf through the many pages, unbelievably happy. I don’t understand anything, but the pictures show me everything that could possibly exist in the world. Clothes, furniture, garden tools, sports equipment, electronic devices, all kinds of other gadgets, jewelry, watches, and obviously toys. I’m convinced that the catalog is a record of everything that could possibly exist, and now that I’ve seen it, nothing else in the outside world can surprise me anymore. There are *Otto* and *Universal* catalogs strewn about, too, but I always come back to the *Quelle.*

Every night when Papa comes home from work, he reads to me from the children’s Bible. I lie on his chest while he does. Sometimes he’s still wearing the polo shirt from his supermarket job, and I smell the tangy sweat that’s seeped into his clothing from the day. The cloth my head is resting on smells manly, smells like home. Then he opens the Bible, holds it in front of our faces, and begins to read. It doesn’t matter to me what he reads—the Bible isn’t as exciting to me as the *Quelle* catalog; the illustrations are duller and not as thrilling. But I fall asleep so quickly, and I don’t even notice that Papa has gently shuffled me aside and covered me with a blanket.

“Something’s not right.”

I want to say it. Because my pants are loose and the path is uneven. With every step my pants slide a little further down my legs. I want to tell my parents that something’s wrong, want them to understand: something feels bad. They keep walking on either side of me, each holding my hands. They’re talking to each other, looking at me now and again, strolling along while my pants threaten to fall down further. I start to fidget. Mama notices after a while and bends down to me. I tell her something feels wrong. She listens, looks in my eyes, screws up her own, and lovingly strokes my head with her other hand. Then she shrugs. I really don’t like the feeling of my pants sliding down my legs. I don’t like it when Mama doesn’t fully understand me. She usually understands everything I say.

It feels like everything’s slipping away from me—the ground, my pants, the words that I’m missing. I hate it when clothes don’t sit right, when they itch or stick or hang too far off my body. It’s all too much, too fast. The slope, the steps, the gravel I’m being dragged over because my parents are holding my hands between them to shield me, no idea that my pants are threatening to fall. Then there’s also the heat, sweat, the knowledge that my pants will fall down and not knowing what the consequences of that will be for me. So many unknown outcomes of this situation—and without any hint of success in telling my parents what’s wrong.

I turn my head to the side and bite my mother’s underarm. She rips her hand away and cries out softly, looking down at her arm. Papa asks what just happened. They both ask me what’s wrong, Mama again bending down to me and looking me in the eyes. I cry, but instead of answering I gesture at my pants. Mama cries too, but she understands what I mean and tightens my belt. I’m so incredibly sorry. I don’t want her to cry because of me. I make a promise to myself that I’ll never bite Mama again.

“Ao.”

I say.

“Hallo.”

Says my mother. My mother translates between the world and me. The words make complete sense inside me, but the second they leave my mouth, before they can reach anyone else’s ears, they fall to the floor and break like china before my eyes.

‘Ao’ and ‘Hallo’ sound exactly the same to me. I don’t understand the difference. My mother does understand and bridges the gap between the two. She’s my interpreter. The lack of understanding isn’t a generational difference—other children also don’t understand me, except for this one boy who mutters. Christopher’s face is pale, and the deep red circles on his cheeks make it seem like he’ll collapse from stress at any moment. But he doesn’t, and somehow we understand each other. We play Ninja Turtles or Power Rangers and are each other’s only friends in kindergarten.

With Christopher and Mama the world is in order. Everything makes sense. When I try to talk to others, this crack develops. The crack makes me mad, turns my whole face red and sniffling, but I don’t shriek, because I don’t like loud noises. If I liked loud noises, I would yell very loud every single time someone doesn’t understand me.

“Andi… I’m afraid that Michael’s going to become an unsure, shy boy who’s going to be easily persuaded to do drugs just to fit in,” my mother confesses.

“Drugs? Really, Michaela? He’s five years old.” My father laughs.

“It’s not funny. We’re responsible for another human life. All parents are, but Michael has a handicap, and that makes it more difficult to set him on the right path. You don’t notice all his idiosyncrasies, either. They change constantly—sometimes he has a completely new tic every week,” my mother explains.

“Like what?”

“Like cutting his nails. Especially his toenails—it’s so unpleasant for him I think it’s painful.”

“That can’t be the only one.”

“Until half a year ago he was fairly quiet and could easily entertain himself, now he wants to be constantly busy.”

“He’s still a child.”

“On the playground he hardly ever knows what to do with himself.”

“Do you know what to do on the playground?”

“He avoids anything with swings, heights, or speed.”

“Maybe he’d rather do something else. He knows what he likes.”

“He’s clumsy when getting dressed, and it becomes an ordeal.”

“I still don’t know how to tie a tie, and before my first cup of coffee shoelaces feel like a small challenge.”

“You don’t want to believe there’s a problem, do you? Sometimes it gets really uncomfortable when no one understands him.”

“I only meant that all in all he’s a great kid. And wouldn’t you be out of sorts if I didn’t understand you?”

“Of course. Trust me, I’d be just as angry. When something doesn’t go right for him, he gets really upset.”

“He turns red and cries a little. At least he doesn’t shriek like other children. But he’ll grow out of that too, I’m sure. We’ll manage this together.”

“You’re not taking this seriously. I’ve read books about this. At his age he should be much, much further along. When he’s kneading Play-Doh and some of it squishes out, he doesn’t even try to make something with it.”

“Have you tried to make something with Play-Doh? It’s not that easy, I’m telling you!”

“Everything’s a joke to you, isn’t it? But it’s not funny dealing with it every day. It’s stressful. He balks when I try to teach him something, like the correct way to say a word. Even when he mixes up the letters he thinks my version is wrong. Or if I try to show him a trick to make something easier, like how to manage the handrail. He tells me, ‘That’s not right. That’s not what it’s called.’”

“I believe you. That does sound exhausting. But surely there’s something positive, right? Like when he’s playing with Duplo blocks—he has a fantastic imagination, and when people can understand his stories, they’re really quite something.”

“You’re right.”

“See? He’s got a strong imagination.”

“He’s also very into jigsaw puzzles.”

“There are kids who like jigsaws, I’ve heard.” My father chuckles at that.

“He often remembers things that I’ve completely forgotten.”

“Clearly our son needs to be on ‘Wetten, dass…’ this weekend.”

“There’s still the thing with his vocabulary we need to discuss. The outpatient clinic for physically and multi-disabled children said he should be speaking way more than fifty words.”

“And he will.”

“I think so too. In the meantime, he’s still capable of having real conversations. He mixes up phrases and forgets some letters or combinations, but with practice and a lot of patience you can understand him.”

“And you’re an expert at that. I mostly don’t understand him—and then you’re right, he gets angry.”

“He also likes drawing, and he holds the pencil correctly.”

“See! Anyway. A sliver of hope. Let’s hold onto that pencil. And believe me, our next child will talk so much we’ll be thrilled that Michael speaks so little. It’ll even out,” my father says, with a look at Mama’s round belly.

“Do you want to check if he’s sleeping?”

“Yes, I will,” my father says, and puts out his cigarette.

“I’m a bick, bick görl in a bick, bick wörld,”

I sing loudly.

Bravo Hits 24. I’m six.

I can hear my new little sister Tina screeching through the closed nursery door. She’s a really loud baby, so I have to sing really loud.

The CD cover lies unfolded on top of the world map that is my desk mat. The cover is colorful, with a lot of tiny photos of people that together make up the text *Bravo Hits*. I only ever play the first CD. The first song is my favorite song. I hit ‘Rewind.’

“I’m a big, big girl in a big, big world,” crackles through a stereo that wasn’t made for priceless masterpieces like the *Bravo Hits* CD.

“Our big, big girl in the big, big world.”

Later at dinner my parents laugh, translate the meaning of the lyrics for me while I sort the vegetables on my plate into little piles by color. My English isn’t good enough to understand the song. Theirs is just about good enough. The lyrics don’t really matter to me. I’m just enthralled by the singer’s voice. I know there’s something happening in the song, some big sensation.

At school I only share once that it’s my favorite song. When some of the other kids laugh and I don’t understand why, I decide then and there to never share my favorite songs with others again. I listen to it now and again in my room with the door closed and don’t sing along anymore.

“I’m a big, big girl in a big, big world.”

The song tingles under my skin.

“Oh my God!”

My father yells, and jumps out of bed. I’m seven years old, standing in my parents’ bedroom, and my pajamas are wet and stick uncomfortably to my skin. I don’t understand what’s wrong, but I know that it’s an emergency for my parents. Tina, lying in her crib, also wakes up and begins to shriek. Everyone is agitated. The wetness in my pajamas is blood, spurting out of my back. My parents pack my sister in her basket and we drive straight to the hospital. I’m dizzy.

My parents tell me that the hole the blood was running from was so small it was like it had been made with a needle. I wonder how so much blood can come out of such a tiny hole. Whatever I have is called something that ends in ‘oma,’ but not a hematoma, something else. I don’t understand the name and forget about it.

“If someone asks, especially the girls at school, tell them that it’s a bullet hole, that they took a bullet out of you. That’ll impress them!” my father recommends, and I feel like a hero. I can hardly wait to tell the story, and I’m sure that the girls in my class will revere me from now on.

I forget about the scar. As I’m writing about it, I haven’t felt it in years. It’s in the upper third of my back, between my shoulder blades and spine, where people rarely see. It’s longer than I remember. Back then, the hole where all the blood poured out was just a dot, but when I feel the raised scar on my back, it’s almost three centimeters long.

It was a hemangioma, I found out later, a benign vascular tumor, also called a strawberry mark. It’s very unlikely that hemangioma burst. In the hospital they stopped the blood flow, then I needed to wear a bandage around my back for a while and not do things like jump on a trampoline or anything else with a lot of motion. So, things I didn’t like to do already.

I don’t have any relationship with the scar. It tells a story that isn’t mine. One that my father gave me, and one that no one else believed.